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AUTHOR O'Reilly, Robert C.; Sheridan, Thomas M.
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ABSTRACT

Public attitudes toward financing public education from state and federal sources, voucher systems, and value added taxes are analyzed using responses from the Gallup polls, 1969 to 1974. The results show that the public will not accept increases in local property taxes or increases in federal expenditures beyond present levels. Voucher systems and value added taxes were not favorably received. When local taxes are reduced, the public favored state aid to schools, but after 1972, when the connection to reduced local property taxes was eliminated, the support for state aid was reduced. It is concluded that during the current economic circumstances, the public will call for reduced public education expenditures. (DW)

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An Analysis of the Public Attitude Toward the Financing of Public Education as Reported in the Gallup Poll of Attitudes Toward Education, 1969-1974

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by

Robert C. O'Reilly, Professor

and

Thomas M. Sheridan, Graduate Assistant

Educational Administration
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Financial support of public education has become one of the most pressing difficulties facing school boards and administrators. Inflation and the rising costs of materials, books, equipment and buildings are placing a severe strain on budgets. With the same problem confronting every local government, increasing competition for the tax dollar exists. Since many local governmental units, like the schools, depend primarily upon property taxation for revenue, the homeowner and businessman are faced with a constantly increased tax liability placed on his property. Growing reluctance to pay higher property taxes has been labeled by some newscasters as a "Taxpayer's Revolt."

How significant is this question? What does the public see as a solution? An indication can be found in the Gallup Poll of Public Attitudes Toward Education, 1969-1974. The Poll was commissioned by CFK Ltd. in 1969 to record and measure some attitudes of Americans toward schools. The survey included questions about finance programs as seen by the public. Questions varied from year to year. One type of question which was involved in each poll conducted from 1969 to 1973 was devoted to financing, including

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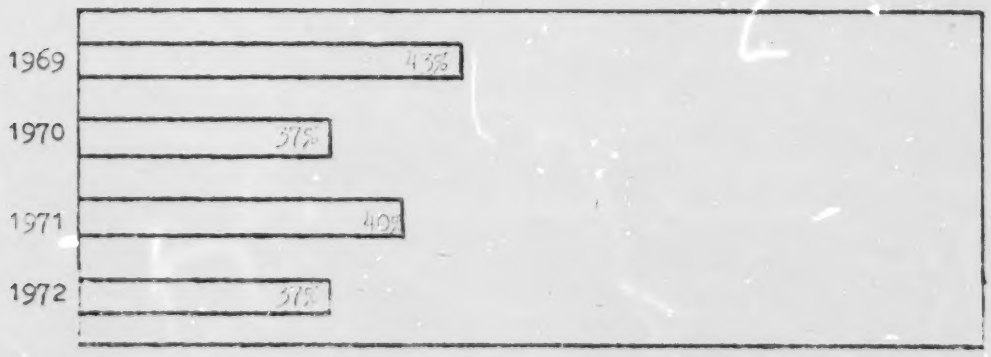
state financing and federal financing through the voucher system or the value added tax. There was a variation in the sample each year. The first survey in 1969 involved 1505 persons. The sample was expanded to include 1592 persons in 1970 and was reduced in 1971 to 1562 persons. In 1972 and 1973 the sample was increased to 1614 and 1627 persons respectively. This paper analyzes the results of the poll on these questions from the years 1969 to 1973 and poses some conclusions which can be drawn from them. The information source was the Gallup Polls as published in the Phi Delta Kappan during each of the six years, 1969-74.

In 1969 the question asked was "Suppose the local public schools said they needed more money. As you feel at this time would you vote to raise taxes for this purpose?" The question was asked in the same manner in 1970, 1971, and 1972. It was not repeated 1973 or 1974. The national response in all four years indicated that fewer than half of the respondents would vote in favor of a raise in taxes for the schools. (see Figure 1.)

Figure 1

Response of All Categories



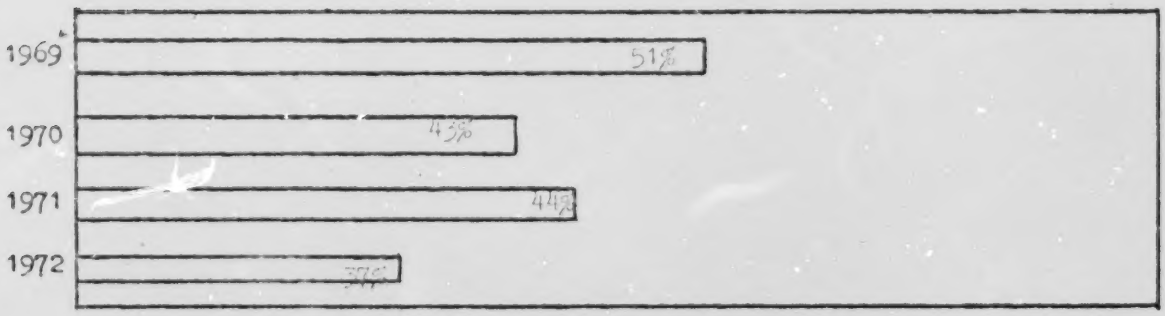
The survey included persons with children in public schools, those with children in parochial schools, and people who had no children in school.

Parents of children in public schools would, of course, be the most

directly affected. They not only pay taxes but their children are direct beneficiaries of that support to the schools. However, they generally showed little interest in a raise in local property taxes. In fact, their enthusiasm for increased tax support dropped during the four years in which this question was used.

Figure 2

Response of Parents With Children in Public School

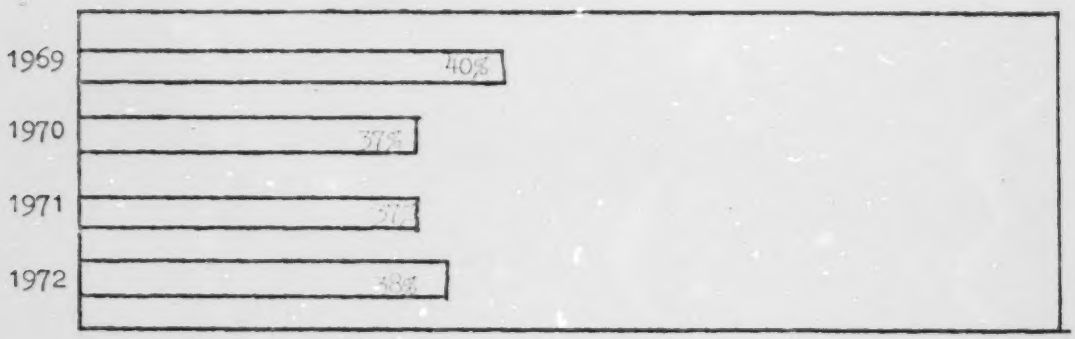


As seen in Figure 2 above, 51% voted to increase local taxes in 1969 while in 1970 only 43% voted in this manner. Favorable reaction rose slightly in 1971 when 44% indicated they would vote for increased taxes but it dropped back to 37% in 1972. The trend of sentiment for support is clearly downward.

Parents of children in parochial schools were consistant in their attitude toward increased local property taxes. Like their counterpart, they were not overly responsive to increased taxes. One differentiating factor to be considered would be the smaller benefit they receive from public school funds.

Figure 3

Response of Parents With Children in Parochial Schools

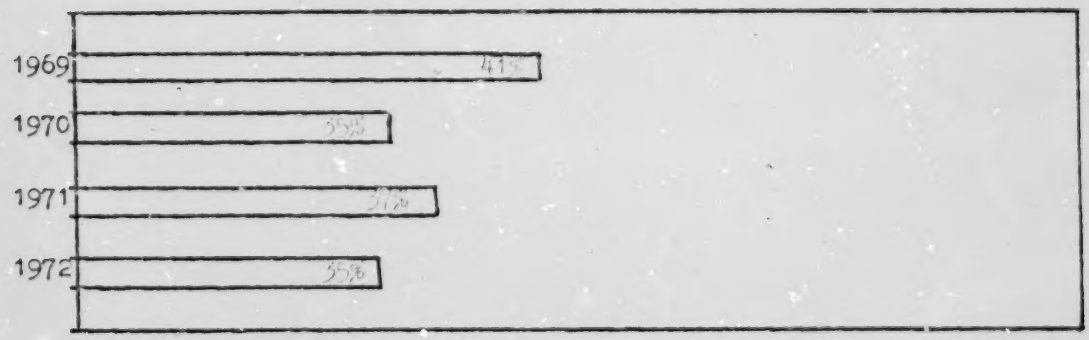


As Figure 3 shows, only 40% would have voted for an increase in taxes in 1969. Constancy continued in 1970, 1971, and 1972. The parents who were not clients of public schools showed a rather constant, but low, level of willingness to support.

People with no children in school showed the least interest in raising taxes. As Figure 4 indicates, 41% showed willingness to increase local property taxes in 1969. Only 35% in 1970 and 1972 and 37% voted favorably on the question of increased local taxes for support of the schools.

Figure 4

Response of Persons Who Have No Children in School



School boards and administrators can take little comfort from the results of this survey. Still, administrators and boards must fund the

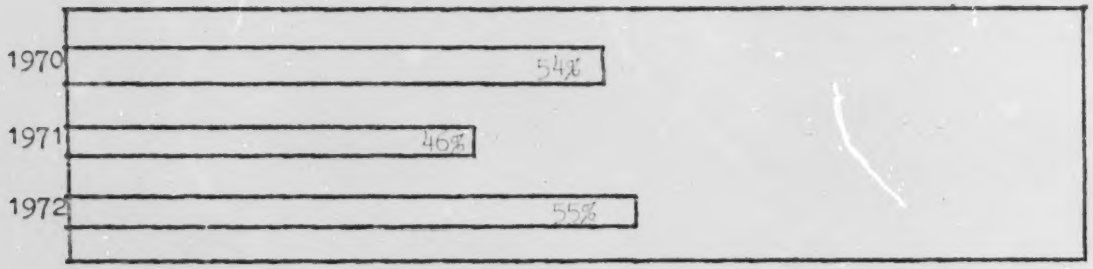
schools and the money must come from somewhere. What is the best source of funds acceptable to the public? The Gallup survey sought an answer in the polls taken from 1970 - 1972. The survey sought the answer through the following question.

> It has been suggested that state taxes be increased for everyone in order to let the state government pay a greater share of school expenses and reduce local property taxes. Would you favor an increase in state taxes so real estate taxes could be lowered on local property?

The states have multiple sources of revenue which may include a property tax. Generally, state aid would be funded through a tax other than a property tax. In this regard, the national response was more favorable. As shown in Figure 5, acceptance ranged from 46% to 55%.

Figure 5

Response of All Categories

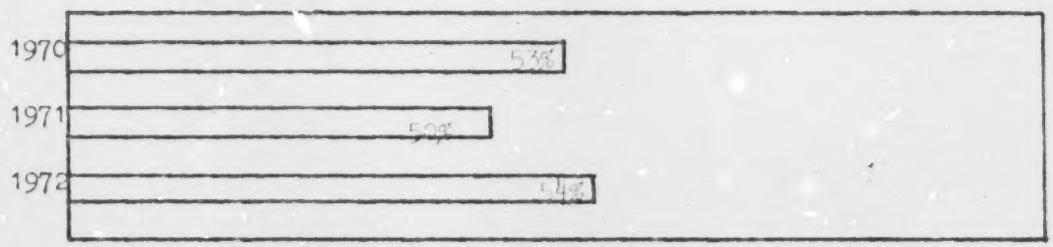


Even then, some resistance to the proposition was shown. In 1971 less than half, 46% indicated support. In 1970 and 1972 more than half favored the idea, 54% and 55% respectively.

In all three years about 52% of the parents of children in public schools indicated approval of state aid and reduction of local taxes. Figure 6 shows 53% in favor of state aid in 1970, a drop to 50% in 1971 and a rise to 54% in 1972.

Figure 6

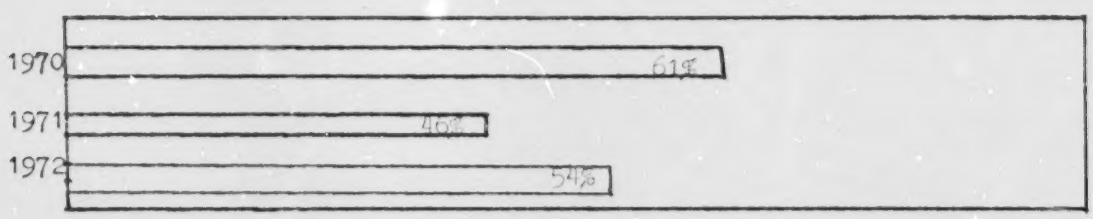
Response of Parents With Children in Public Schools



The attitude of parents with children in parochial schools fluctuated on this question. As Figure 7 indicates, a walloping 61% favored state aid and local tax relief in 1970. However, support fell to only 46% in 1971. It rose to 54% in 1972. Uncertainty about the consequences of such taxing shifts seems to prevail among this population which receives relatively smaller direct benefit from the public schools.

Figure 7

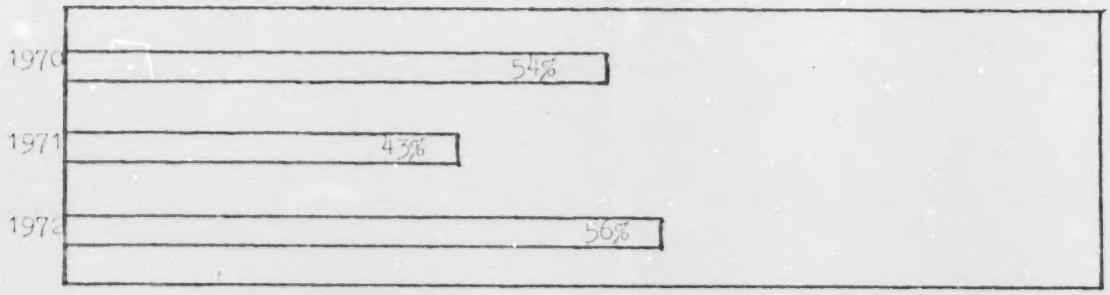
Response of Parents With Children in Parochial Schools



State aid to schools found favorable support from the majority of people who did not have children in any school in the years of 1970 and 1972; but less than half were favorable in 1971 as revealed in Figure 8. In a slight question revision, the population revealed that 54% and 56% favored state aid with local property tax relief in 1970 and 1972, respectively. The percentage dropped to 43% in 1971.

Figure 8

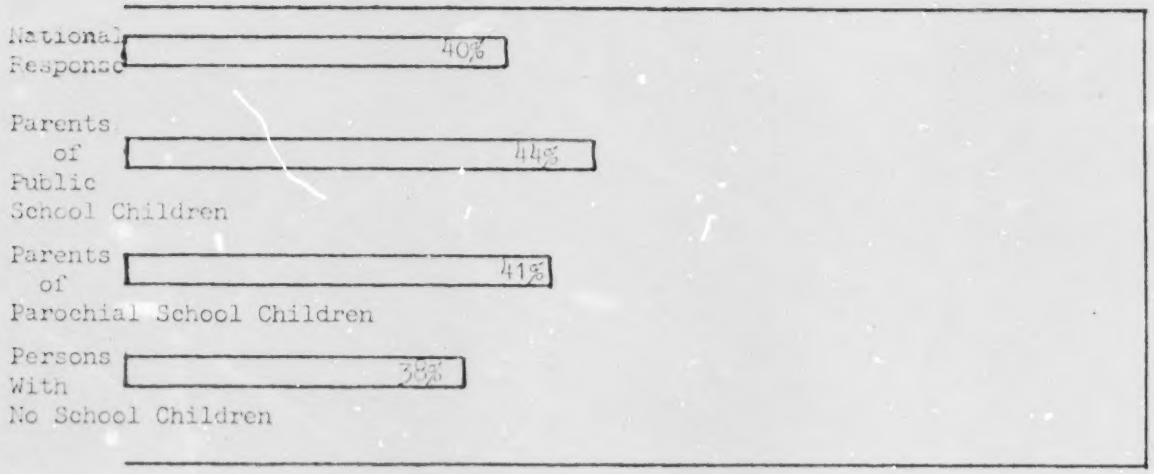
Response of Persons With No Children in School



An indication of the importance of relief of property taxes in the mind of the public was shown in the Gallup Poll of 1973. When the question of state aid was presented the part on local property tax relief was omitted. The favorable answers dropped to 40%. The parents of children in public schools responded at a level of 44%; Parochial school parents gave a 41% favorable answer, and 38% of the persons with no children in school gave a favorable response. Clearly, state aid with its inevitable increase in state taxes must be tied to a reduction in the local property tax load if citizen acceptability is one goal.

Figure 9

Responses - All Categories
State Aid Without Local Tax Relief (1973)



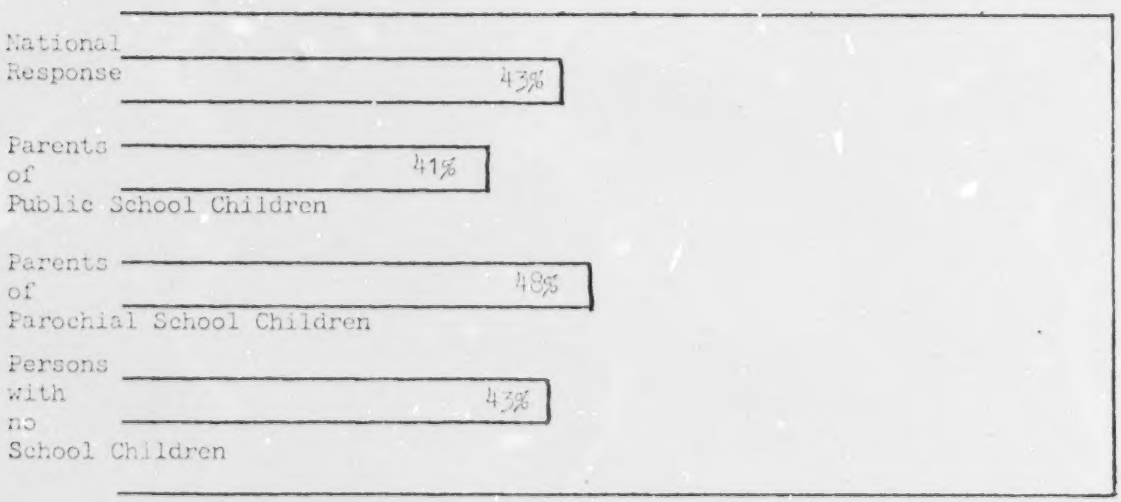
The Poll also explored alternative methods of financing schools other than local property taxes or state financing. In 1970, 1971 and 1972 questions on public attitudes towards a national sales tax, referred to as a "value added tax", and a voucher system were asked. In the voucher system the government issues vouchers to parents who then select the school and send their children, using the voucher to pay the costs. Both involve extensive federal funding.

In 1970 the poll question was:

> In some nations the government allots a certain amount of money for each child for his education. The parents can send the child to any public, parochial or private school they choose. Would you like to see this idea adopted in this country?

Figure 10

Responses - All Categories
on the Voucher System (1970)

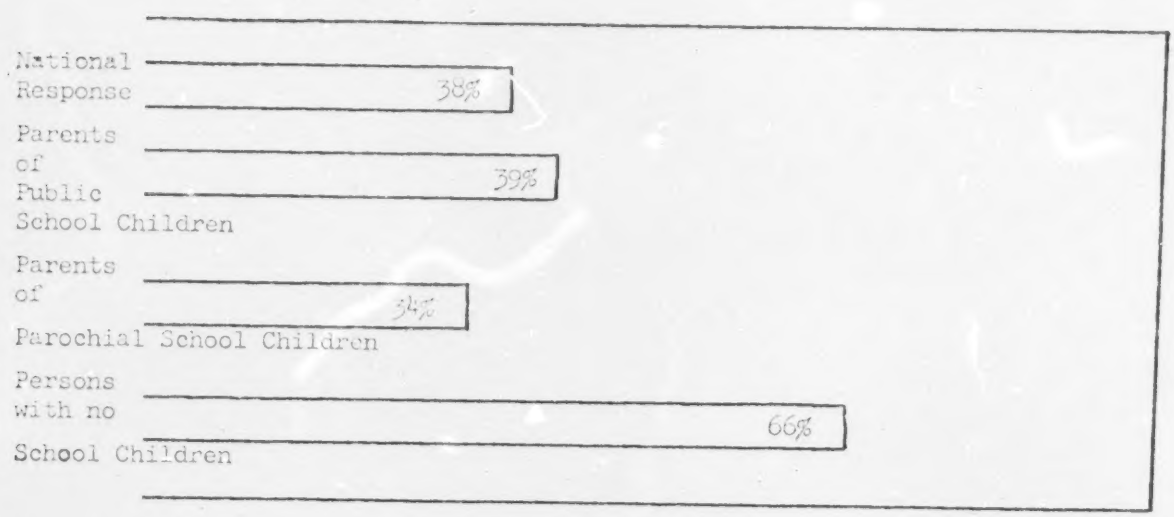


The national response indicated that 43% were favorable to the idea. When broken down into the three categories previously used, the poll showed a 41% positive response among public school parents; a 48% favorable response among parochial school parents; and, 43% of the persons having no children

in school responding favorably. In 1971 the question was amended for clarification by adding the sentence, "This is called the voucher system" prior to the question. While favorable responses were lower there was no major difference in the total response of the response of public school parents from 1970. The parochial school parents indicated a significant change in their acceptance of the voucher system with an increased favorable response from 48% in 1970 to 66% in 1971. A marked decrease in the favorable attitude of persons with no children in school is shown by a drop from 43% in favor in 1970 to 34% in 1971.

Figure 11

Responses of All Categories
on the Voucher System (1971)



The question about the national sales tax was asked only once in 1972.

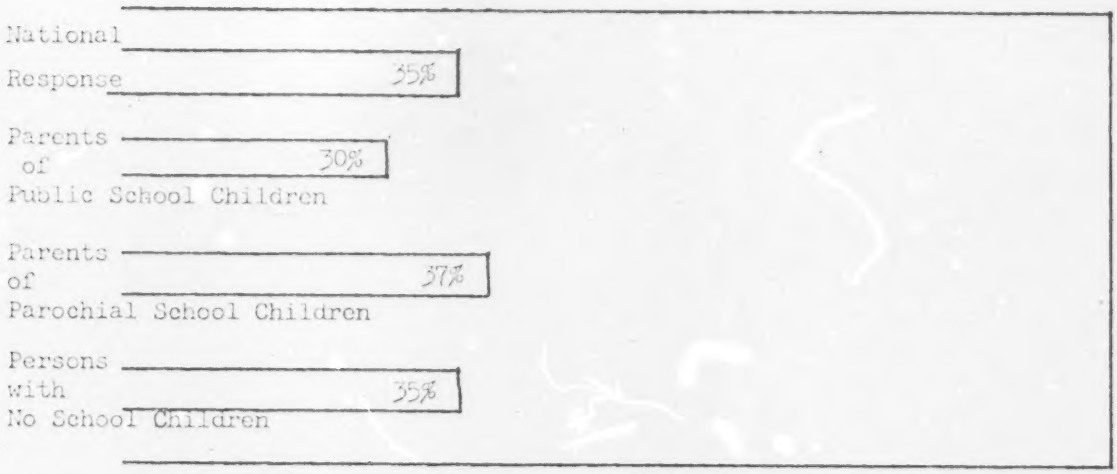
> It has been suggested that a new kind of national sales tax, sometimes called a value added tax, should be adopted to help reduce local property taxes that now support public schools. Do you favor or oppose such a tax?

Acceptance of this new tax was low. Nationally, the response was 35% in favor of the tax. Public school parents were 30% in favor of the tax.

Parochial school parents responded favorably at a level of 37% while persons having no children in school matched the national response with 35% responding favorably.

Figure 12

Responses in all Categories
on the National Sales Tax (1972)



Can school boards and administrators develop any conclusions from this information? One conclusion is immediate. That is, the public is not accepting of the idea to raise local property taxes for the support of the schools. A second conclusion can be drawn also. In so far as the results of the poll are concerned, the public does not look favorably to systems of financing which involve large federal expenditures beyond present levels or new federal taxes. They were against the voucher system and the value added tax, although the questions concerning these two methods were used only in 1971 and 1972. However, it is surely safe to say that nothing in the current national economic picture would indicate increased public acceptance of new federal taxes for education since 1972.

The poll found the public accepting the idea of state aid to schools up to 1972. At that time the question involved the reduction of local

taxes as an integral part of state aid. In 1973 the portion about reduction of local taxes was not included. Acceptances dropped to a 40% favorable response. From the fact that local property taxes must be involved in state aid it could also be concluded that the resistance to higher local taxes is still a fact of life. This conclusion rests upon the fact that during the years when both questions, raising local taxes and state aid with reduction of local taxes, were asked, the majority favored the latter method of school financing whereas few voted in favor of raising local taxes. While the question of raising local taxes was not asked in 1973, the state aid question reflected the question indirectly by eliminating that part of the question on reduction of local taxes.

Since the questions on school financing were not a part of the Gallup Poll after 1973, actual public attitudes were not measured. It would be impractical to extend any conclusions too far beyond that period.

In view of the present economic situation it is unlikely the public attitude has changed. Facing the unique situation of inflation and a recessionary business slump causing an increase in unemployment, and the pressure for increased property taxes by local governments to meet their obligations the public will probably continue its reluctance to increase or add new taxes. The public is more likely to call for reduced expenditures if the present economic trend continues.

An indication of the public attitudes in Nebraska was seen in the statewide November 1974 election. A proposal for state aid was presented to the voters in a referendum. The proposal had a definite method of allocation of state aid to local schools but did not include a clear and definite method for the reduction of local property taxes. The measure went down to defeat by a substantial margin. While Nebraska may not be considered

a bellwether state, it is seldom far away from the national attitude, which, in various populations, is aversion of additional taxes unless some form of tax relief is also indicated.